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WHAT DOES QUEBEC REALLY WANT?

NOTES FOR A TALK BY

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What does Quebec <u>really</u> want?

There is of course no single answer to that notorious question -- the question that many Canadians have been asking themselves for 35 years or more, ever since the beginning of the Quiet Revolution.

The short answer is that, not surprisingly, different Quebecers want different things. Quebec today is a modern, open, free, democratic and pluralistic society. Therefore it is axiomatic that no one person or group can speak for all Quebecers, and that even includes the government of Quebec itself. On the central question of Quebec's possible separation from Canada, it is very clear indeed that the present government of Mr. Parizeau does not and cannot speak for all Quebecers.

A recent CROP-EXPRESS poll, carried out for the federal government at the end of March 1995, illustrates this situation very well. It asked 1,474 respondents how they would vote on five different versions of a possible referendum question. Here are the results, giving only the Yes and No percentages, and leaving out the Undecideds and the Don't Knows. The questions are ranked in ascending order of the size of the Yes response.

1) If the question is on independence pure and simple, only 32% of the respondents would vote Yes, and 58% would vote No. The No side is ahead by 26 points, and has a clear overall majority, approaching the 60% No result of the 1980 referendum.

2) If the question is on giving the Quebec government a mandate to negotiate sovereignty (more or less the 1980 referendum question), 39% would vote Yes -- almost the same as in 1980 -- and 51% would vote No. The No side is ahead by 12 points, and has a bare overall majority. The No figure of 51% is significantly less than the actual 60% result in 1980, but pollsters have found that the Undecideds tend to vote No in the actual referendum, and of course the referendum campaign hasn't even officially begun yet.

3) If the question is on a sovereign Quebec, but associated with Canada in certain ways (sovereignty-association), 48% would vote Yes, and 38% would vote No. The Yes side is 10 points ahead of the No side, but is just short of a clear majority.

4) If the question is on a politically sovereign Quebec, but in a union with Canada (some would say that this is the situation of Quebec -- and of all the other provinces -- today), then 54% would vote Yes, and 38% would vote No. The Yes respondents are 16 points ahead of the No respondents, and are in a comfortable overall majority. Depending on the degree of political sovereignty for Quebec that is implied by this question, one might interpret this result to mean that 54% of Quebecers are more or less content with the present federal arrangements. On the other hand, if this question implies that Quebecers would

first vote to separate and then afterwards seek a new form of union with Canada, the obvious problem with this option, as with sovereignty-association, is that no Quebec government can guarantee to Quebecers that a new and satisfactory union or association with Canada would be possible after a majority vote for independence. This option is just beginning to be seriously discussed in Quebec, and we can assume that the polls on this question will change considerably once the uncertainty of a new union with Canada becomes clearer.

5) And finally, if the question is on a renewed federalism, with Quebec remaining in Canada, 63% would vote Yes, and only 29% would vote No. So this is clearly the most popular option of all, with the Yes side being ahead by 34 points, and having a majority greater than the No side in 1980. But of course we must remember that the question will not be on renewed federalism, because Mr. Parizeau has made it very clear that he has no interested in improving the Canadian federal system, only in getting out of it. Nevertheless, this result shows that most Quebecers want their province and themselves to remain in Canada, provided that certain areas of jurisdiction can be re-arranged.

The margin of error of this poll is 2.5%, 19 times out of 20. Taking this margin of error into account, it is interesting to note that the so-called hard-core separatists probably can muster only about 30% of the voters to vote for outright independence. One pollster estimates that about 20% of Quebecers truly want separation -- and this figure has not changed in over 15 years -- and that the other 10% would vote for separation for tactical reasons, in order to give the rest of Canada a shock. Another experience pollster has said that about one-third of Quebecers favour independence, another third favour Canada's federal system, and the remaining third favour some intermediate arrangement or are simply undecided.

With these polling results as general background, and remembering that public opinion can change over time, and that the undecided or uncertain voters can be influenced by a strong and effective referendum campaign, I am now going to make a confident prediction: barring some major strategic error on the part of the federalist forces, and assuming no spontaneous incidents that make Quebecers' blood boil (like the trampling of the Quebec flag that was filmed in Brockville a few years ago and broadcast over and over again on television in Quebec), the federalist or No side will win the referendum handily, perhaps by as much as the 60/40 margin in the 1980 referendum.

I make this prediction with confidence because most Quebecers understand that Quebec's separation from Canada would be a disaster, not only for Canada, but also for Quebecers themselves. Moreover, the separation of Quebec from Canada is completely unnecessary for Quebecers to achieve their most

cherished objective, namely the preservation and promotion of the French language in Quebec and in Canada. Indeed, Quebec's even greater isolation as an independent francophone state in the anglophone sea of North America would probably worsen, not improve, the long-term prospects of the French language on this continent. In addition, it would deprive Quebecers forever of their current significant role and influence in the country with the world's seventh largest economy, the only country that is a key member of all the world's most important international organizations, and the country that has been rated the best to live in in the world. It would also spell the end, after more than two centuries, of the world's most successful example of a bilingual, multicultural country; and that would be a major setback for the cause of tolerance and respect for different cultures inhabiting single states everywhere on earth.

So rather than analyzing any further today the prospects for the referendum itself, I would prefer to talk a little about the prospects for national unity after the referendum. And rather than cursing the seemingly everlasting darkness of the relationship between Quebec and the rest of the country, I will try to light a small candle, and to speak constructively about what I think that all Canadians must do.

The first thing that English-speaking Canadians must do -- and this is perhaps the most difficult thing of all -- is to try to understand the fundamental concern or anxiety that all Canadian francophones feel about the possible danger of losing their language. Language is the only significant difference between Quebec and the rest of Canada; all the rest is largely window-dressing -- minor distinctions that Quebec nationalists attempt to trump up into major differences. But the language question is very real, and the linguistic isolation and vulnerability of francophones, as a small minority in the North American context, is the basic and the only reason for the existence of the separatist movement in the first place.

So English-speaking Canadians must recognize, explicitly and ungrudgingly, that the ultimate protection for minority language rights is a sovereign, independent government that is politically controlled by the language group in question. This is exactly what francophone Quebecers now have in the province of Quebec, which is fully sovereign under the Canadian constitution in matters of language, education and culture, subject only to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We must also recognize that the government of Quebec is the only sovereign government in North America that is controlled by francophones, who constitute about 80% of the population of the province.

Secondly, we also should publicly recognize that the government of Quebec, precisely because it is the only sovereign

government in North America controlled by francophones, has legitimate and important responsibilities in supporting Canada's minority official language, which no other Canadian provincial government has. But although the government of Quebec clearly has all the necessary powers and authority to protect and promote the French language within Quebec, it has no jurisdiction in the rest of Canada. Many francophone Quebecers have a deep concern about the situation of francophones and the French language in the other provinces and territories. They look primarily to the federal government and the courts to guarantee and protect the legitimate rights of francophone minorities in the other provinces, and these institutions have been much more successful in this regard since the Official Languages Act of 1969, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982. But much more remains to be done by several provinces, including British Columbia, especially in the area of full recognition and respect of francophone educational rights.

It would therefore be a grave mistake to return to the days of relying entirely for the protection of the rights of Canada's official-language minorities on the whims of provincial legislatures and governments that often have little sympathy for minority language rights, and even less political interest or incentive to support them. But at the same time it would be extremely helpful to the federalist cause in Quebec, and to the ongoing cause of Canadian unity after the referendum as well, if governments and particularly school boards in the other provinces were to be more open and generous in recognizing and respecting the legitimate rights and concerns of their francophone minorities. Political and educational leaders in the other provinces could have a major impact on public opinion in Quebec by demonstrating a more open-minded attitude towards French language rights in their jurisdictions.

Thirdly, we should not hesitate to proclaim the merits and genius of federalism as the best system of government for the variety of peoples who live in Canada today. There are several positive features of federalism that we tend to take for granted, but which all Canadians ought to remind ourselves of more often.

The first essential feature of federalism is that the various component jurisdictions are each sovereign in the spheres of governmental responsibility assigned to them under the constitution of the federation. So as I have already said, under our federal system, Quebec, along with all the other provinces, is already fully sovereign in such vital areas as education, culture, and property and civil rights, subject only to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. But even the Charter may be overridden for five-year periods by an act of a provincial legislature under the so-called "notwithstanding clause".

The counterpart of provincial sovereignty under a federal

system is of course the fact that the several provinces are part of a single country, which is much larger and stronger than any of the individual provinces alone, and which therefore gives them both a much larger and richer economy and market, and much greater international influence and stature, than any of them could possibly achieve on their own. In a well-conceived and well-governed federation, it should certainly also be the case that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This was clearly the vision of the Fathers of Confederation, and it is a vision that we must constantly strive to achieve, although we all too often allow regional squabbles to obscure it.

The second remarkable feature of Canadian federalism is its great flexibility and adaptability. It is a myth that Canada cannot modify its governmental arrangements simply because we have a constitutional amending formula whose requirements are extremely difficult to meet. Mr. Parizeau and his party claim that the choice facing Quebecers is between independence and the status quo, which he portrays as being unacceptable to Quebec. But the fact is that there is no such thing as the status quo in Canadian federalism, if by that he means a set of institutional arrangements that are frozen in their present structure for all time. The fact is rather that Canadian federal arrangements are in constant evolution, and have been ever since 1867. We do not require a constitutional amendment to reach new administrative agreements between governments in Canada. The hallmark of our federal system has always been that where there is a will, there is a way. If we can reach agreement at the political level to make changes, then we can always find a way to make the changes, if necessary without resorting to a constitutional amendment.

The third very attractive characteristic of our federal system of government is not at the governmental level, but at the level of the individual citizen. It is the fact that there is a far greater likelihood of people preserving a maximum degree of individual freedom in a country where executive and legislative authority is divided among two mutually autonomous levels of government. It is often said that the American Founding Fathers designed their constitution, and later their Bill of Rights, so as to minimize the risk of dictatorship or authoritarian rule by limiting the role of government as much as possible, and by building in a system of checks and balances among the executive, legislative and judicial branches. Although we have a different history and form of government in Canada, it is nevertheless true that the provincial and federal governments act to some degree as countervailing influences upon each other, constituting a natural deterrent to governmental excess and abuse of power. It is unquestionably advantageous for Canadian citizens to have two levels of government to turn to for assistance or for justice, instead of just one from which there could be no appeal. It is also sometimes helpful for Canadian residents to be able to move from one province to another without formalities and without

abandoning their country, if they should find themselves in strong disagreement with the policies of a particular provincial government, or if they should prefer the economic prospects of another region. Such internal migration is far more common in Canada than many of us realize.

As for the argument that our federal system has produced unnecessary, wasteful and costly duplications in the activities of the two levels of government, the facts show that while true to some extent, the degree of such duplication is vastly overstated by the separatists. In areas where it is really a significant problem, it could easily be fixed by administrative agreements if the governments concerned truly wished to correct the situation. Mr. Parizeau, of course, does not.

So there are many good, strong and convincing reasons for keeping this country together for the benefit of all Canadians. At the very least, it can be said with certainty that it is highly unlikely that any of us -- and that includes all Quebecers -- could do better separately and apart than we now do united and together. We should keep our federal system, our two official languages, and our high standard of living, all of which are the envy of most other countries and most other peoples in the world. We should continue to work to improve our economy and our system of government, and particularly to make francophones feel more at home and more welcome, not only in Quebec, but in the whole of Canada.

In summary, we must always be prepared to reassure francophones and Quebecers that we want and appreciate them as full and equal partners in our confederation; that we share their worries about the Canadian economy and high level of public debt; that we understand the deep concerns of Canadian francophones about their language, and that we support them in their reasonable attempts to promote and protect it within and throughout Canada. And if we who live outside Quebec can demonstrate to our fellow citizens in Quebec that we genuinely want to do this, then we will have gone a long way towards creating the climate and the spirit that we need in order to ensure that the Quebec separatist movement will never again be a serious threat to the survival and prosperity of our beloved Canada.